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Diaspora and Kamila Shamsie

Abstract: In the contemporary world, moving from one place and settling in another country has become quite a common experience. This process has been in place for thousands of years. The term ‘diaspora’ was originally applied to the Jews who were forced out of their homeland. However, at present, the term stands for relocation of groups of people or members of a community from one nation to another, it may be voluntarily or sometimes through force. Diaspora refers to the variety of categories of people that includes political and war refugees, migrants, ethnic and racial communities, immigrants, expatriates as well as transnational communities. Kamila Shamsie, the chosen Pakistani women diasporic writer who belongs to the second generation depicts the diasporic experiences in her writings. The author in her novels focuses on alien land, religion, culture, identity, society and gender through the study of different characters under various situations in the selected novels.

Key Words: diaspora, immigrants, identity, migration. Cultural alienation, displacement.

Every diasporic movement holds a historical significance, as it carries within itself the seed of a nation’s history. Migration mostly implies change which involves risk of losing one’s identity and acquiring another identity of an alien nation. Preservation of cultural identity in

the host society is perhaps the most imperative factor of the concept of diasporic productions. Therefore, diasporic literature is a journey towards realization, recognition and the expression of the self. Most of the Pakistani English fiction writers fall into the category of immigrants. They rebuild their lives in their host country and make it their second home. Kamila Shamsie falls into this category of diaspora. Born in 1973 in Pakistan, has a firsthand experience of living in her own homeland and United States of America as well as UK. She completed her graduation from America and has been working in England. She was quite at home in her new setup, maintains transnational sentiments at the same time keeps her links with her homeland in particular, the place of her origin, Karachi. Her keen interest, observation and experience of national and international politics along with a profound knowledge of historical events like Pre-Partition, Partition of India, the 1971 war, World War II, nuclear testing, 9/11 all constitute as the background to her novels.

As one of the most prominent contemporary Pakistani English fiction writer, Kamila Shamsie occupies an important position to give a clear cut picture of a nation in turmoil that is of Pakistani society in all her novels. By depicting the various women characters, in reality she wants to show how the nation that has various challenges from every side. She is able to bring out the characters in different situations where the passions, fears and anxieties of these become evident. All her novels give us the important aspects of political and historical events which are in connection with the human emotions. She has seven novels at her credit namely, *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Slat and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2002), *Broken Verses* (2005), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), *A God in Every Stone* (2014), *Home Fire* (2017). Most of her novels are set in her home town, Karachi, Pakistan, while *Burnt Shadows* (2009) extends several continents and partly based in Karachi. Shamsie has portrayed strong women characters in the novels who live in the male dominated society of Pakistan, and are capable to rise up to the situations of the society. Shamsie has the literary impact of her family background in her

writings. She hails from a family, where literature is much viewed and treasured. She is the daughter of Muneeza Shamsie, a literary journalist and editor from Pakistan, niece of Attia Hosain and granddaughter of Begum Jahanara Habibullah, a writer. All her novels will not be dealt in details in this article only two namely, *Salt and Saffron* (2000), and *Kartography* (2002) that has the theme on diasporic identity as well as memories of home will be discussed.

Partition is to be seen as a form of exile in *Salt and Saffron*. Shamsie's narration of partition is a powerful tool to enlighten the readers about the reality of history and exile. In the novel we come across the two generations people. The first generation is of primitive mind who wants to keep up to the rules and traditions of the family clan. Whereas the second generation members are of modern mentality who wants to live in the present and enjoy who are not much interested with the ancestral tale. Dadi, Mehr Dadi, Timur who belong to the first generation and are migrated to Pakistan at the time of partition but they have a longing for their ancestries. They evidently detest those whom they had left behind but at last own that they were being part of them. Homi Baba describes "hybridization" [an idea taken from Edward Said's work] as the "emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism." In his *Location of Culture* (1994), he comments on the state of remembering, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" [Bhabha]. At the heart of expatriate consciousness is the issue of identity. The identity of the immigrants becomes hybrid and fluid because of geographical movements. The migrants may live in new places but that is only as imaginary homeland: They never feel comfortable in their newly occupied home/ country. They live as Bhabha states: "in between two geographical cultural locations, which is often perilous and marginalizing," and these "in between places provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal- that initiates new signs of identity" (17).

Salt and Saffron (2000), second in the chronology of Kamila Shamsie's novels which won her a place in Orange's list of 21 Writers for 21st Century, is set in Karachi. It apparently deals with the prejudices and "objects of baseless terror" (Shamsie, Salt and Saffron 1) of families that are fostered by it through generations as well as the matter of identity. The family traditions are handed down to the ages has become the vital part of the existence of the members of the family. As a result the family members are either being shaped or other times victimized by it. "We of the royal family of Dard-e-Dil have always held true to our family fears. No marriages, conversions or redistributions of wealth can change that. Not-quite-twins are not-quite-twins; no way around that." (Salt and Saffron 2). No doubt, often such prejudices have to be accepted without questioning and nonconformity to them calls for banishment from the family.

The novel defined in relationship to the memories of the homeland. The concept of identity is highlighted by narrating numerous, diverse experiences. It also portrays the cross cultural differences between Karachi and New York. Aliya is returning to her beloved home Karachi after four years of her study at an American University. She breaks the journey to visit her cousin at London and there she meets on the plane Khaleel, a boy from Karachi, Liaquatabad. The story has a historical background dating back to Timurid Lang that runs parallel to the Mughals. Dard-e-Dil aristocratic family, with the shared distinction of "angular features, prominent clavicle and straight back hair" (Salt and Saffron 7) has a historical presence. Aliya being the member of this aristocratic nawab family, begins to question the values with which she has been brought up especially when she meets the man (Khaleel), of a poor background considering him as the 'salt'(low class) and she as 'saffron'(high class). Aliya realizes that she is carrying the family heritage along with her. So the generations of the members of the family with many anecdotes that are revealed as the story unfolds when the protagonist, Aliya, in search of her own love story climbs through the Dard-e-Dil family tree.

Mehr Dadi expresses her feelings in the novel: I miss my family. You all drive me mad limbs (Salt and Saffron 220). The conversation with Aliya regarding Dadi's past life in India depicts her emotions on the loss of her country and having come to know that she cannot go back to India:

It's all very well to love a place, but in the end what matters most is the people who live there. ... She pushed my hair off my face. 'Let it go my darling. Some people leave our lives, it happens. People leave. Let it go. (Salt and Saffron, 183-204).

Aliya, always loved and cherished the sweet memories of Karachi where she belongs while her stay in America. This also displays the 'aesthetic enthusiasm' (Blunt & Rose 1994:61) towards her homeland:

... trees and houses and electricity poles silhouetted against the sky ... the rustle of the leaves was a benediction. Karachi's nights remind you that you can love a place, and for me that's always been a reason to rejoice (Salt and Saffron: 172).

This shows her bond to the native land and the flash back she has in America. She has 'always loved the brashness of that city' (Salt and Saffron:85). Aliya is caught between 'the dual or paradoxical nature' (Cohen 1997) of the consciousness from the very beginning. Although she calls the idea of 'Not- Quiets' is more like 'bugaboo' that means 'object of baseless terror', being an expatriate she acknowledges the reality of being an 'other' (Said: 1978) throughout the novel. It narrates her sadness of living in loneliness which makes her insecure that she is not accepted by the foreign society. There is a continuous conflict within her, the resentment towards the foreign culture and the deep desire for the life spent in the homeland.

The similar type of experience Shamsie narrates in her third novel *Cartography* (2002). It brings out diasporic aspects within the external boundary of the national setup as they reveal

how political separation can separate two emotionally bound people, and how politics can destroy the friendship and relationship of two families. Shamsie expresses her strong desire to belong to Karachi her home town in this novel through the character of the protagonist. She feels that she is a Karachiwallah at the same time is comfortable at her present stay in both the countries. More than ever before, the mental faculty of retaining and recalling the past experiences of diaspora are in circulation today. It is not because of its continual manifestations, but owing to the literature inspired by the diaspora is what keeps going. Kamila Shamsie narrates the whole picture of the trauma of Diasporas in her writings. This novel gives an entire scenario of Pakistan, which has its own nationalist ideology after the partition from India and further was shaken by a second blow that is the trauma of the civil war that led to the creation of new country- Bangladesh in 1971. Pakistani writing is linked with an experiences of immigration and the displacement of culture, history and ideas. This may result into conflicts and crises mainly on the mental trauma of the people:

Between our birth in 1947 and 1995, dead bang between our beginning and our present, is 1971, of which I know next to nothing except that there was a war and East Pakistan became Bangladesh, and what terrible things we must have done then to remain so silent about it. Is it shame at losing war, or guilt about what we did to try to win that mutes us? (Kartography 270).

Shamsie, as she specifies herself a Karachi diaspora, presents three individual characters in the novel they are: Raheen, Karim and Maheen. Raheen and Karim are presented as best friends who later get separated due to the partition of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Their bond of friendship which was so strong was cut off and have their memory of the map of Karachi. Raheen the protagonist of the novel who is thirteen year old, narrates the parting story. Her parents move to America for her graduation and return after three years. Being far away from her native land she misses the grandeur of her hometown. Kamila Shamsie traces her

protagonist's (Raheen) voice and conveys the message that Karachi is the 'home' around which the entire discourse revolves. The final resolve of the protagonists to make an electronic map of the city as their lifelong project to bring order to its disorder expresses Shamsie's depth of diasporic attachment and concern for her city. The diasporic experience, exposure and opportunities have made her 'Londoner and a Karachiwallah' at the same time. Shamsie wants to present an objective image of Karachi with all its turbulent history and rising violence. Raheen also owns the city despite all its turbulent history and calls herself a true product of her native land, Karachi. There are two main historical themes that directly run across this novel, namely 1970 -71 war and the other 1986 -1994. Shamsie relates these events to partition and migration and relates the displacement caused by the civil war of 1971. So the experiences of the displaced people lies at the heart of Shamsie's discourse of displacement. So the main purpose of reviewing this novel along with *Salt and Saffron* is that it has wider implications of the unrest of 1971, when civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan and the result of it Bangladesh came into existence. One can note that Shamsie does not consider the geographical boundaries of a nation rather traces the true value system that her nation inherits from its parent nation. The part of the novel is set in pre-independence India, customs and traditions which define Pakistan's cultural heritage. Set in violence ridden Karachi, *Kartography* is a narration of how wars and political turbulences cause to change the complex relationships and thus have a far reaching, extremely tangled and permanent effect on human aspects. So coming to Pakistani history the theme of diaspora is very much linked with this novel, along with Shamsie's second novel- *Salt and Saffron*.

The novel *Salt and Saffron* is however, an effective endeavor to reconcile the competing forces of past and present of globalization and localization, tradition and modernity. The novel when it is observed intently is innovative and fresh in its approach and treatment as it revisits the past traditions and conceptions and deletes them as irrelevant in the modern setup of upbringing of

the people. There is longing for the common place, things of people who are forced to live out of their country. There is also the thematic message of the novel where Salt indicates for the poor and Saffron stands for the elite classes of the society. The novel points to the class struggle that is highlighted through the characters of Aliya and Khaleel, Mariam and Masood. Shamsie emphasizes the nation and the traumatic consequences of its division within the notion of the family.

As a diasporic author, Shamsie is optimistic and meticulously frames the scene of her beloved homeland, Karachi through her works. Her society and its culture with all its flaws, has developed the attitude that values understanding and brotherhood in the present situations. All her novels provide a relevant political issues that awakens every reader as well as a diasporic note in all her writings is taken into consideration. The longing for the homeland or the assimilation into the alien culture is what one finds as unique in her writings. She stresses the concepts of Pakistani history which goes back to the 1971 war and to the partition of 1947, which gives to Pakistani diasporic fiction its own unique identity.

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